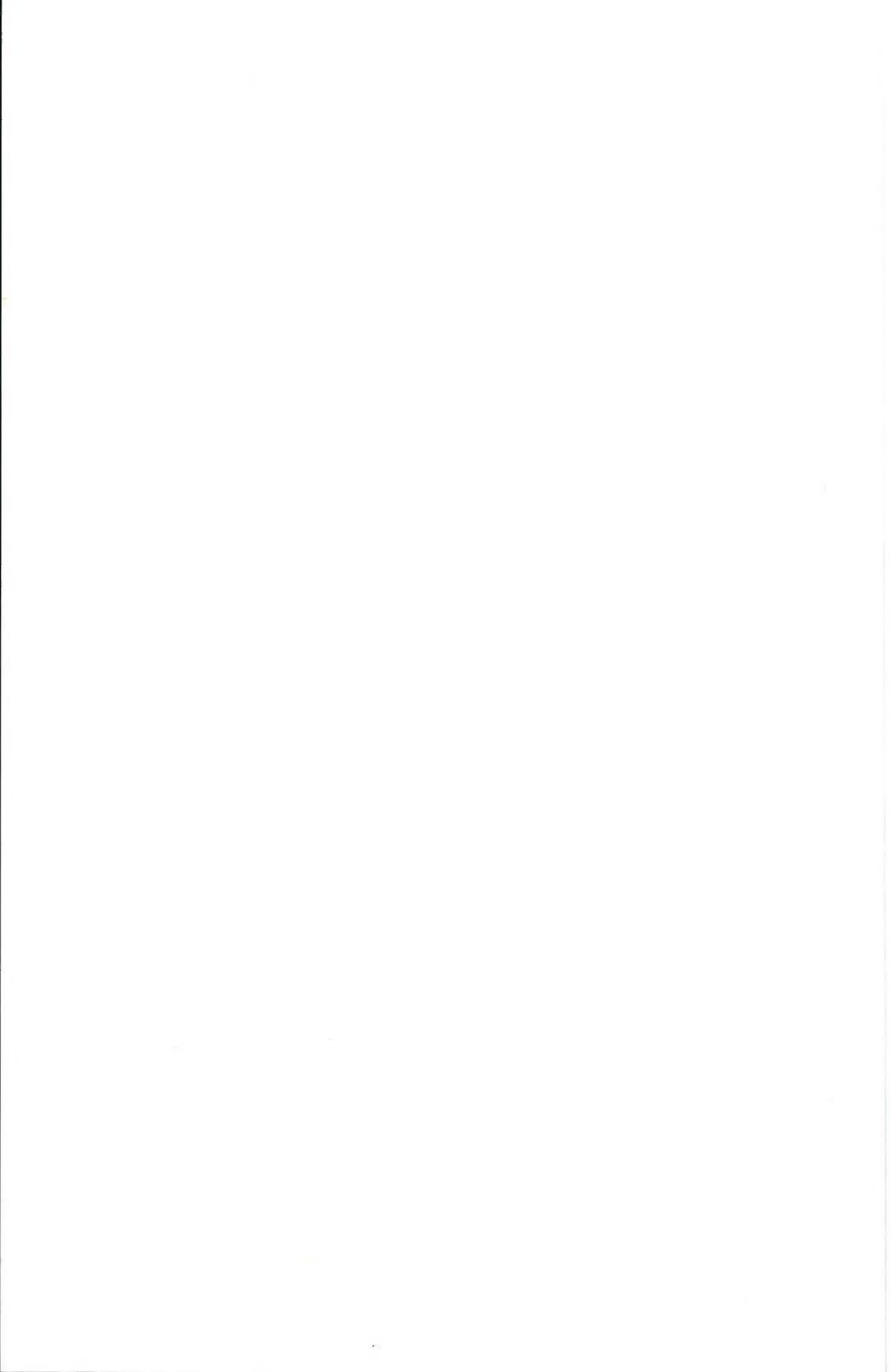
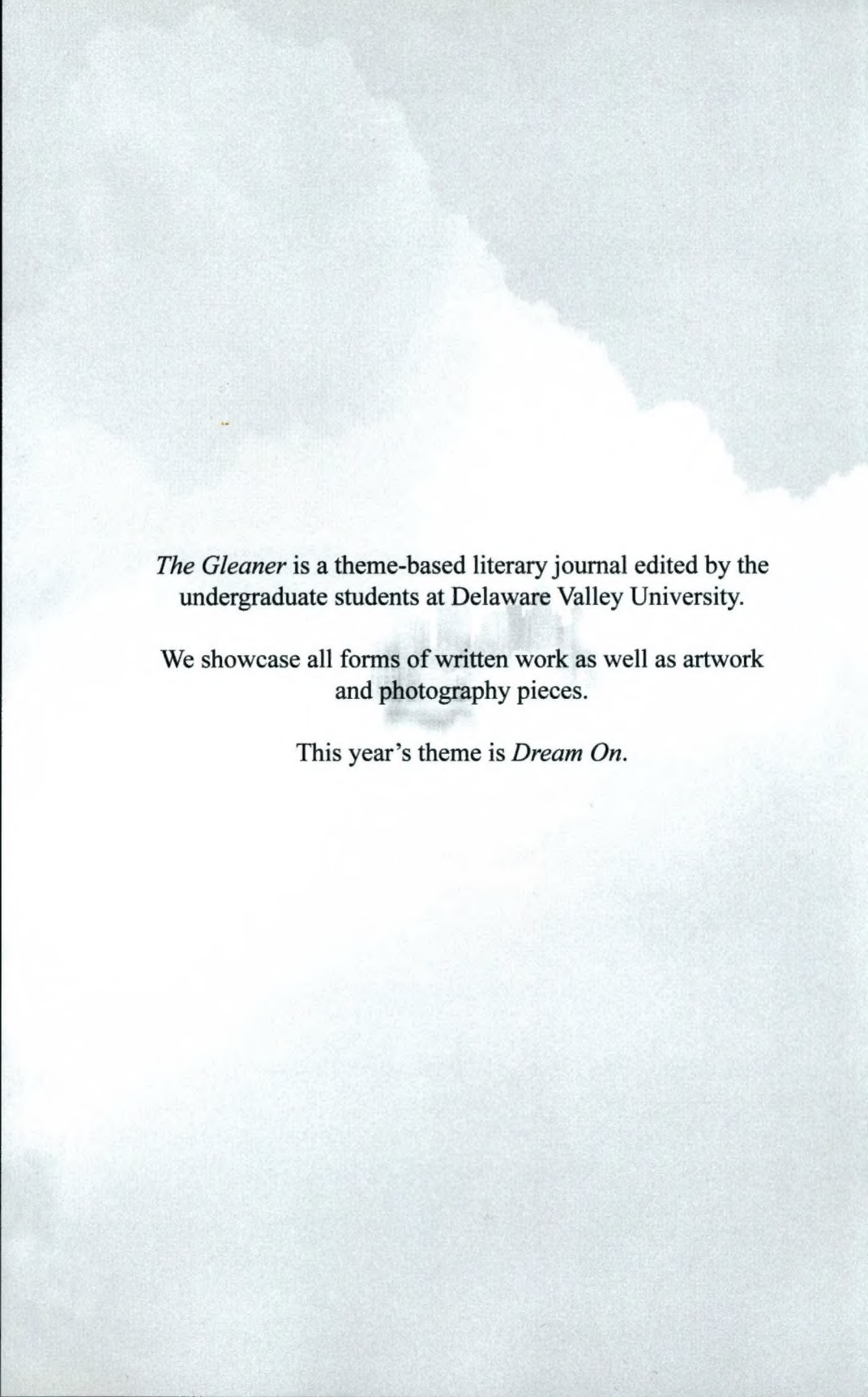




The Gleaner 2022-23








The Gleaner is a theme-based literary journal edited by the undergraduate students at Delaware Valley University.

We showcase all forms of written work as well as artwork and photography pieces.

This year's theme is *Dream On*.



For the music makers and the dreamers of dreams

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I'm an Adult?

by Zaida Martin

Crawling into my mother's warm embrace
Hiding my wrought and bony face
In her arms, the smell of Calyx perfume lingers
Lush greens, rose, and citrus on clothes my body long outgrew
Dog hair on my socks, memories of skipping cold, flat rocks
Hard and smooth, lined up like the stuffed animals
On my little bed with the butterfly sheets
Out to dry on the laundry line, billowing in the wind
Drawing out the last remnants of childhood grace

Eventually, time ticks away, taking with it
Never-ending days of carefree love and starts to
Drain into a new sense of lingering liability

The Difference Between an 'R' and an 'A'

by Mackenzie Ridenour

When I was about five or six, my biological father sat me down and looked me in the eyes. He told me, "Mackenzie, if anyone ever comes up to you and calls you a 'n*gger' with a hard 'r,' they are not your friend, and that is disrespectful. But if they say 'n*gga' with an 'a' is not." At the age of five or six I had no clue where this had a relevance to me and to this day I still do not know.

I was raised predominantly by my mother's side of the family, who are Caucasian (Native American German). I was never around my black family, seeing as the relationship with my African American father was abusive towards my mother and I. As a young child, I remember always getting comments about my hair and how different, and exotic my curls were. I never really understood why this was striking to people because my hair was just a pain in the butt to deal with for me. Tight kinky curls that matted faster than a wet dog with long hair. As I grew up, people compared how gorgeous my dark skin to everyone else's and how dark I got during the summer. My skin was just the largest organ in my body, and its pigment had nothing to do with a beauty standard for me.

This newfound fascination with my dark skin made its peak around middle school. Middle school is everyone's worst nightmare but for me it was exceptionally worse than most. There was bullying and petty immature fighting over boys. Middle school is a time I would like to forget ever happened and I do the same for those that I went to school with me, forget what they said or did. I switched from a private school to a vast local public school. The students were predominantly African American and Latino or Hispanic, and to me, it made no difference. This school is where I began to see color for the first time, and maybe it was because I always got comments like "Oh, are you

adopted?" When I brought friends home, and they met my family for the first time. I always answered with a kind "No." and laughed it off. I think I struggled in middle school so much because of how I acted three times my age. People always made comments about my hair or my skin or how articulate and mature I was. I always brushed it off as complimentary, but looking back, I wore sort of color-blind glasses. I did not see the uneducated and slanted commentaries towards the African American Community. I always got comments like "Are you Mediterranean?" "No, why?" "You are just so beautiful, and you are so articulate." I look back now, and I see these sideways compliments as their unconscious bias. "Are you trying to say that a black person cannot be beautiful or articulate or so incredibly well educated?" I would think to myself.

I was able to give all those horrible middle school forenames a clean slate when I transferred to high school for a specialized program. In my sophomore year of high school (last year), I dated a boy, emphasizing boy, who was born into a family of racists and bigots. He always claimed he was never a racist and that there is no way he could ever be a racist because he was dating me. Our relationship started as friends, and then we grew closer and closer, but I started to become blind to the slanted comments about my skin color at that time. If I drank Starbucks, I became "the whitest black girl" he had ever met. Alternatively, maybe I helped him with schoolwork, and he would say to me, "You are pretty smart for a black person." I laughed it off like I had done every time I received a slanted remark. Soon they popped up in every conversation, and my skin tone was always the butt of the joke. I told him he needed to stop and I was not okay with this sort of "joking," that I was more than just my skin color. He responded, "Of course, Kenz. You are a smart and intelligent young woman." and that is where I fell in love with a kind boy who would throw me under the bus and make me feel like I was not worthy of love from a man but that is a story for another time.

Unfortunately, this was not where our racial issues ended. On 25 May 2020, America saw the climax of our nation's racial division. Men and women of African American descent were outraged by the death of George Floyd. I lived through this division, and I learned from this

moment in history. The boy brought this monumental moment up in our conversation; at this point, we were no longer together and decided being friends were of our best interest. He said, "I am scared to be a white boy in today's society"... Read it again and again, just how I did when I first received his message. He went on and on about how bad it was, and I tried to share my opinion to which he shut down, saying he did not want to hear what I had to say. He did not want to hear from a young African American woman, who had received slanted comments on her beauty all her life. My whole colorless life shattered before my eyes. I cried, sitting on the floor of my mother's at-home office. I cried, not understanding why this boy I was still in love with was so bigoted and uneducated. It is not that I did not know that there were people like him out there, uneducated, biased, and racist. It is the fact that until now, no one had ever called me a "n*gger" with a hard "r." I began to rethink what I knew and whom I knew. All those comments – you are so articulate, your hair is so thick and gorgeous, you get so tan during the summer, and so many more – ran through my mind swirling like a tornado headed straight for my morals and fragile perspective.

I think about this conversation a lot and maybe more than I should. I think about how my whole life there was a blanket of protection from the bigoted people, and even still, they managed to leak through the fabric like a chilly breeze of a fall day. I think about how I had the same conversation with another individual who had opposite opinions to mine, and we managed to figure out a way to educate ourselves and remain great friends. I have learned that some people are just never willing to educate themselves and unfortunately many other minorities, women, African American, Native, Hispanic, Latino and many others are the ones who are suffering. This motivates me every day to educate myself before I speak and always be aware that I am not the only person on this planet who has it rough. However, the biggest lesson learned is that I now know the difference between a hard "r" and an "a."

I know what I have lost

by Kimberly Sauers

I know what I have lost
And I know knowing
The shapes around me begin to form familiar reels
Shapes, then faces, then the faces I know
And yes, I know
The fog dissipates, it's cruel shadow only background noise now
I see the faces of my son and my daughter
Yes, my son and my daughter
They realize as well
They see the light in my eyes so long extinguished and obfuscated
My son runs from the room to call my brother
My daughter sits by my side, and holds my hand
I can feel the pressure of her squeeze in my fingers
"Mom?"
Her voice is a melody, a brush of bright yellow sun that paints my
years
"Mom.,” I repeat back, then "Sweet Pea”

A man,.. my son, returns to the room
"Mom, mom"
"She's speaking to me!"
I move my face. Inside I smile, though I do not know if it appears on
the outside.
The room smells of disinfectant. There are beautiful blue hydrangeas
by the bedside. I am sitting up, though not supporting myself. My
hands bear the wrinkles and spots of all my years.

My life has been so beautiful.
Planting in the garden
Cooking dinner with an impatient toddler pulling at my apron
The weight in my arms of my first grandson
My mother telling me how beautiful I look in my wedding gown
Helping my radiant daughter into her own wedding gown

My schoolfriends and me preparing to walk the graduation stage
My little boy telling me all about his first day at school
A little puppy licking my face
A tropical vacation with my best friend by my side

I know what I have lived
I know what I have gained

I look into the corner of my room
Then back at my beautiful children
Their eyes are pleading, warm, wet with tears
They are home
I am home

I see nothing
I feel nothing
I know that they will be okay.
There is peace.

Rocks and Pebbles

By Lizmary Ortiz

Kicking the rocks on the miniature shoreline,
she happens to send a pebble flying.
Like opal it shines
as it catches a low flight and skips
-one, two, three times!
She'd never skipped a rock before,
it was a skill so essential to those who lived by lakes and bays,
but she was from the city.
Grinning, she flutters her pale legs again,
splashes of sage water jumping up from their disturbed tranquility
as she breaks the surface tension eagerly.
Somewhere further down the edge of the lake,
a duck begins its descent and lands gracefully onto the water.
Like a plane making its arrival, its webbed feet skid and skate
across the surface before penetrating the top
and bringing the feathered thing to a floating state.
There were no ducks in the city,
just geese from the North passing overhead
as towards warmer lands they fled.
Though she wore distressed jean shorts with a sheer cami,
she longed to dive into the water and be just as the duck was,
laying on the surface with the coolness below its belly,
And, in the warmth of the rural sun, relishing.
Clothes were meaningless things when compared to feelings,
easily soaked and stained,
while memories and emotions
were so much easier to maintain.

"What is it that makes pebbles congregate on the bank
when they could let the water take them elsewhere before they sank?"
she thinks silently.

She stands, leaving her feet submerged still in the little transparent sea;
as freshwater cures the calluses on her toes,
and the harsh skin of her feet-
which were roughed up from walking on pavement paved so coarse
and jaggedly,
seemingly made to reach the destination
but not to enjoy the journey.

A pebble settles between her toes,
the cushion of lake rocks serving as bedding for her feet
“Rocks and pebbles,” she says, “should comprise city streets.”

Inner Demons

by Josephine Gumina

The thin melody from my headphones warmed my ears as I walked along a pleasant forest trail. A warm breeze ruffled my long, brown hair as I ambled happily through the woods. The path I walked upon was dusty but lined with beautiful wildflowers, blossoming jewelweed and spurge. Beams of sunlight danced on the ground and lit up the sandy path. The leaves of the surrounding trees, bushes, and flowers swayed peacefully in the wind as I walked down the woodsy trail.

"Stella! Wait up," a familiar shout sounded from behind me and I whirled around to see my friend running towards me.

"Hey, Amber, what are you doing out here?" I smiled at the welcome surprise.

Amber jogged to a halt in front of me with her golden curls bouncing around her head. She took a second to catch her breath and began to explain,

"I just happened to be out for a walk when I saw you up ahead."

"Suuuure, I bet you're stalking me," I joked.

"Oh, shut up!" she laughed heartily but there was an unnerving glint in her eye.

Amber hit me on the shoulder and we continued together. I was happiest here, being in the forest. It made me feel wild. I glanced over at Amber and saw a look of contentment on her face as well.

"Hey look, I bet you can see really well from up there," Amber pointed to a glimmer that was visible through the trees, "Do you wanna go take a look?"

"Sure," I took my earbud out and tucked it in my pocket before picking my way through the bushes off the side of the trail.

We moved through the woods, careful not to trip on any rocks or roots on our way. The metal ropes and the chain link fence guarding the edges of a bridge glinted in the sunlight.

Amber stepped out of the tree line onto the road with me not far behind and we trotted to the bridge to look over the edge.

"Wowww, you can see the city over there!" Amber squealed and pointed to the shining blur in the distance.

"Yeah," I was more interested in the ravine below us.

The bridge was about a hundred feet in the air and the trees looked like little bushes bursting out of the dead river bed. I looked over at Amber and her blonde hair cascading over her slim shoulders. I blushed at her delicate frame and beautiful green eyes. I turned my gaze back to the horizon before she noticed me staring.

"Hey Stella," Amber turned to me with those glimmering green eyes and a mischievous grin.

"Yeah?" I sheepishly looked over at her.

"I dare you to stand on the other side of the fence," Amber giggled and stared at me expectantly.

"I don-," I began nervously.

"Don't be a pussy," Amber teased me.

My bravado took over and some stupid need to impress her so I declared, "I'm not going to wimp out! Watch this!"

I grabbed the chain link fence and began to climb up a few feet, then I swung my legs haphazardly over the top. I landed on the other side

with a plop, mere inches away from certain death. I made a tight circle and turned around to face the open ravine.

I let go of the fence and turned my head back with a smirk, "Look, no hands."

"No, look. I'm fine," I laughed.

I looked back over at the width of this large, dead river. I leaned against the chain link fence looking down at the tiny, scruffy trees and sharp boulders dotting the landscape far below me. The sound of Amber's voice faded away as I stared down into the abyss while I thought of nothing and everything.

"Okay, I get it, you're not a pussy. Now get back over here," Amber chuckled nervously.

"I don't understand why you're suddenly worried after pressuring me to do this."

"Well I didn't think you'd actually do it, you're kind of a well-known coward."

"What did you just say?" my face grew hot.

"I mean, everyone at school knows it," Amber tried to hide her worry with nonchalance, but I could see through it.

"If I'm such a pussy, then why am I over here and you're not, hm?"

"Well, I—"

"Get your ass over here and then you can talk," my anger was starting to get the best of me.

"Fine," Amber reluctantly grabbed the chain link fence and then stopped, "You know what?"

"What?" A small trickle of fear wormed its way into my mind.

"All you ever do is make trouble for me. People make fun of me for being friends with a freak like you. Why can't you just be normal? Or better yet, choose someone to haunt other than me." Amber shook with her newfound rage.

"I don't understand. I thought we were friends. What's gotten into you?" My anger was melting away into sadness and disbelief.

"We're only friends because our parents are friends. Why can't you get that into your thick skull?" She took a deep breath before saying, "Look, I know this may sound harsh, but I've never liked you and I never will so you might as well find some friends that do."

"Just stop talking," I whispered.

"What was that?" Amber seethed.

"Just shut the fuck up," I screamed.

I knew the moment I yelled that I shouldn't have. The anger in Amber's eyes was the last thing I saw before I got forcibly shoved backward. My sneaker scraped the cement and my legs twisted out from under me. I screamed and reached for the chain link fence. My chin hit the cement and my hand brushed the woven metal. My body plummeted down towards the dead river bed. I fell thrashing through the warm air with the ground rushing up to meet me at an alarming speed. I screamed as I went down and hit the ground belly first with a wet thud. I heard several bones snap and could feel the blood rushing into my lungs. I saw nothing out of my right eye and could only feel the optic nerve spread out across my cheek. I couldn't move anything below my torso, was my spine broken? I couldn't breathe or get up, all I felt was overwhelming agony. I squeaked out a cry into the warm air.

"Hel- help h-", I couldn't get anything out, only a weak gurgle.

"Someone, anyone." I gasped and sputtered, sending a jolt of pain through my chest. But nobody came.

I opened my eyes to my bedroom ceiling. The hazy dream was slowly fading back behind my eyelids and I rolled over to my side. It's been three years since the incident and I had the same nightmare every night. It was always the same. I got up off my bed and stepped onto my grungy carpet with bare feet. I shambled through my one-floor apartment to the bathroom. The cold, white tiles chilled my bare feet and made me shiver. I looked in the mirror at the disgusting visage that faced me. My brown hair had turned red, my eyes turned lime green with cat's pupils, I grew fangs, my nails grew to sharp points, and I had large rams' horns that sprouted from my temples and curled around my ears. Whenever I get a wound, it is bound up with scars instantly. No one else seemed to see the demon that dwells within me, but it was there, as clear as day.

I've been so hungry ever since that incident and nothing sated it. I knew what would sate it, but I didn't like to think about it.

I wandered down the hall into my kitchen and took a look in my cupboard, which was completely bare except for a can of tuna. I sighed and grabbed it. I was going to have to get more food at some point, even if it didn't cease the hunger pains.

I grabbed a can opener and ate the tuna with a fork, but the hunger stayed. I cut my thumb on the edge of the can and I watched my skin web across the gash to form a scar. I sniffed back a loose tear and peeked outside the window. It was dark out, about two in the morning.

It's been a week since I lost my job and my parents are paying for the apartment, but that won't last forever. I have a small sum of money saved up but I haven't touched it yet. Maybe it was time to use it to buy some real food, otherwise, I might die. I giggled at the thought.

I grabbed a black hoodie from the coat closet in the foyer and headed out the front door.

The icy night air flowed around me, chilling my bones. I zipped up my coat and tucked my hands in my pockets. I winced as I accidentally cut myself with my razor-sharp nails. The cut promptly sealed back up

to form a new scar. I looked up at the black trees scratching the dark sky. This was the first time I had been outside in a few weeks.

After about a mile of walking, the dim yellow lights of the 7-Eleven glowed in front of me. The heavy hum of electricity filled the air as I walked across the greasy cement to the building. I stopped before the glass door under the fluorescents and breathed in the smoggy Pennsylvania air. I hesitated a moment before opening the gas station door. The little bell dinged as I walked in.

All of a sudden, my stomach roared with hunger. I gripped my stomach and held the door. I gave a weak smile to the cashier and shuffled behind a few isles out of view. I was drooling uncontrollably and the hunger pains wouldn't stop. I didn't want to believe it but I knew what it was. He was the one making me so hungry. It was the cashier. I peeked at him from behind a row of chips. I took a deep breath and scanned the rows of snacks. I grabbed a bag and headed to the checkout counter. I set the bag on the counter and dug through my pockets for the few dollars I had stored.

"Your total is one fifty, would you like a receipt?"

"Y-yes please."

I was going to make it through this, it was almost over!

"Ouch!"

I jerked my head up from my bag of chips to see the man at the counter shaking his finger. As the blood welled up from his paper cut, I realized it was all over.

Everything happened within a split second. I leapt over the counter with my talons outstretched. Then, with lightning speed, my thumbs were where his eyes should've been. He barely had time to scream before I was on him. I buried my teeth deep into his neck and my incisors went through the cartilage with an audible pop. Hot blood squirted on my face and into my eyes. It flowed into my mouth, filling

it with hot copper. With my jaw like a vice grip, I tugged, and tugged, and tugged while he unsuccessfully fought under my weight until his throat tore open and his screaming turned to gurgling. From there on I blacked out and the only thing I could remember was the steady sound of crunching and slurping.

I woke up looking at the ceiling fan in my bedroom. I got up off my bed and walked over to my dresser mirror. The blood drained from my face and my stomach dropped. My hair was red. My eyes were green. I had ram horns. There was dried blood all over my face. To put it simply, what happened last night was not a dream.

I barely made it to the toilet before I threw up. I gripped the ceramic rim tight and looked into the lumpy red soup below my face. I threw up again. I staggered back to my room and collapsed on the squalid carpet and silently cried until the phone rang.

It was a wall phone with a curly cord attached to the end. I got up and reached for the phone to pick it up.

"Hey, Stella, it's Amber. How've you been? I haven't heard from you in a while," the voice on the other end inquired. I didn't want to open my mouth for I feared that the voice that came out wouldn't be my own. I hung up the phone.

When I placed the phone in the cradle it fell out and bounced around on the cordage like a person on a bungee cord. There was a red handprint on the handle and I stifled a sob. Staring at the bouncing cord, ever so slowly I reached for it. I grabbed the cord and tore it out of the wall. A chunk of drywall dropped off as I did so. I pulled apart the cord and threw it to the wall. The phone rang. I stared at it for a moment and lifted the broken phone to my ear.

"Hello? Stella, you better answer your best friend or she's gonna be mad," Amber's voice giggled from the other end of the line before screeching in a demonic voice, "Answer me, Stella."

I hurled the phone and heard a dull thunk as it hit the wall. I panted and looked at myself in the mirror, but it still wasn't me who looked back.

I threw myself on my bed, unable to get that man's, no that boy's, terrified face out of my head. All I could feel was the sensation of my teeth going through his throat. My mouth began to water again. I violently sat upright and spat on the floor. That wasn't how I felt about this, that's how it feels. Whatever it is.

I returned to the bathroom and flicked on the dim light. I could hear the hum of electricity and the faint buzz of a fly zooming around the lightbulb. I glanced at the toilet, which had a few drops of blood on the rim from this morning. I avoided looking into the mirror as I undressed and turned the squeaky shower knob. The head spat a few times before gushing forth water. Just like the blood from his throat. I smacked my face and got in the shower.

My fingers raced to scrub the blood from my skin, dragging a scratchy cloth along with them. I solemnly watched the blood and dirt run down the drain and started to scrub my blood-encrusted hair. I wasn't quite sure how to wash my horns, but I remembered washing a goat at a petting zoo when I was little -- the small circles I made on its horns with the sponge. I gripped the washcloth tightly and started to imitate what I had done before. To my relief, I saw more grime go down the drain.

I looked at the mirror when I got out, careful to avoid looking at my face. I noticed that I was a little taller than yesterday. Maybe it was all the protein. I started to giggle at the prospect uncontrollably. I couldn't stop and ended up plunging my nails into my arm and screaming instead. The holes closed up instantly.

I headed into the living room after getting changed and plopped down on my little, broken-in couch. I grabbed the TV remote and clicked the power button only to click it again after a flash of censored red on the news.

"Holy shit they're gonna come for me!"

I sprang up and ran to the front window. I pulled back the curtain, expecting to see a SWAT team, but there was no one outside. I took a deep breath and stepped back. Maybe if I watched the news they'll say if they have any evidence yet. Yeah, there's no way they already have suspects, it only happened last night! I walked back over to the TV and turned it on. Just as I suspected, they don't know what happened. I read the small script at the bottom scroll by.

"18-year-old male by the name of Daniel Bokurk dead at the scene. Camera footage suggests a man about 5'4" with red hair. Call 911 immediately if spotted."

The screen showed a grainy picture of me in the gas station, then repeated what was scrolling across the bottom.

The TV crackled when I shut it off. I need a walk, I thought tiredly.

I opened my wardrobe once again and dug for a different hoodie, people knew about the other one. I yanked a dark purple one off the hanger that was quite large on me.

I walked outside into the cool autumn air. The trees were a beautiful array of orange, yellow, and... red. Flashes of bright red blood splattering on the floor and walls played through my mind. I shook my head and took a deep breath. That wasn't me. I continued to walk into the warm sunshine and smell the sweet scent of leaf rot on the wind. I stepped out onto the sidewalk and started at a leisurely pace. A woman with her golden lab was walking toward me, but I didn't feel anything weird. Maybe it's over. But the moment she got within ten feet of me, her dog started to go crazy, and so did my stomach.

The dog's fur was raised and its tail was in between its legs. When it started to rapidly bark at me, I took a step back and bit my lip to keep the hunger at bay. Its eyes were wild, they looked like they were about to pop out of its head.

"Delilah! You stop that now!"

The woman tried to wrangle the dog away from me.

"I'm so sorry, I've never seen her like this," she looked up at me and furrowed her brow, "Are you okay ma'am?"

"Yeah, it's nothing."

I was drooling uncontrollably again, but I shielded my face and sped around the woman and her dog. I could hear the dog continue to bark at my back as I walked down the sidewalk at a brisk pace. All I wanted to do was get as far away from people as possible. The dog acting up was a coincidence, this whole thing is almost over.

I was beginning to feel better as I approached my front door and grabbed the handle but just before I pulled out my key, I heard a clatter inside. I had a sinking feeling that I forgot to lock the door. I started to sweat as I turned the knob. It was unlocked. My breath caught in my throat and I slowly opened the door and looked inside. Everything was dark and quiet, but then I heard rustling. It was coming from my bedroom. I took a deep breath and walked inside, quietly closing the door behind me. I tiptoed towards my bedroom door, which was slightly ajar. The drooling started.

I could hear more objects clattering inside. There were several footsteps and more rustling.

Drip.

The drool started to flow down my chin as I inched closer to the door.

Drip.

My heart was in my chest.

Drip.

I stood before my bedroom door.

Drip.

A man burst through the door. He looked back at my room and then stopped dead when he saw me. I was about to run when he pulled a handgun out of his back pocket. I froze; my stomach started to gurgle again and my shirt was sopping wet with drool.

"Get on the floor!"

"No, you don't understand. You need to run!"

Drip.

My eyes started to well up with tears as images of the cashier flooded my mind. The burglar's hand shook and he shouted for me to get to the floor again. I could barely hear him over the blood rushing in my ears. The man didn't move but my hunger only grew.

"I said run!" I practically roared.

Drip.

The drool was dribbling down my face and I could feel my muscles contracting.

Bam! Bam!

I was falling backward. My ears were ringing and all I could feel were two intensely painful points. They were on fire. I could hear someone screaming over the ringing, then I realized it was me. The fire began to bloom and blister on the gunshot wounds and they took over my focus, I couldn't think and everything went black.

I was on the bridge again, staring down at the ravine far below, only this time, it was me who dared Amber to go on the other side. I told Amber she was a burden who held me back. There was someone else there too that Amber couldn't see. It was the demon. She stood on the edge with us and laughed a very jolly and good-humored laugh, but there was nothing funny about it.

Amber looked like she was mad but I never heard what she said. She yelled and I couldn't tell if it was me or the demon who pushed her, but she was falling and screaming toward her death a hundred feet below.

I opened my eyes to a huge headache. I groaned and sat up holding my head. My fingers brushed my horns and I grimaced. Then with a jolt, I realized I could smell blood. My eyes snapped open and I looked around. I was laying on my couch, the house looked completely normal. I couldn't remember going to sleep or anything after yesterday morning. I started to sit up only to have two stabs of pain shoot through my shoulder and stomach. I groaned and lifted my purple sweatshirt, noticing it was soaked in ink. I looked at my torso and saw a large gray lump, like a big pimple. I cautiously squeezed it with my thumbs. Silver started to show beneath my skin. I gritted my teeth and closed my eyes for the final squeeze. I heard a pop and looked down to see a bullet sitting in a pool of black ink- no, blood? I watched the webs of tissue seal up the hole and fasten a small light spot.

I stood up, letting the bullet clatter to the floor, and started to walk toward the bathroom to get the other one.

Blood.

I froze, the smell was wafting up from the foyer. I carefully walked toward the corner and poked my head out, breathing heavily.

The man's arm was outstretched towards the door. There was a streak of blood from the doorknob to his hand resting on the floor. His innards decorated my walls and his blood painted a starscape on my

ceiling. I fell to my knees and cackled. I laughed loudly as the tears streamed down my face.

"I told you to run!" I screamed shrilly and sobbed.

I looked up and froze. It was Amber on the floor.

Her head was twisted around facing me with dead, cloudy eyes.

Her body still lay on her belly.

Her mouth opened with a wet plop and from it came husky, decayed words.

"You didn't fall off the bridge that day, I did. It was you who killed me. You pushed me off and left me to die on the ground. You won't even let your guilt consume you, instead, you let it consume everyone else like the selfish bitch you are. How many people have you killed in the past three years, hm? All to avoid the fact that I'm dead and it's all your fault."

"No," I shut my eyes tight and screamed, "It wasn't me!"

"Look at me. You did this."

I opened my eyes and we were back on the bridge. I stood alone on the cement strip with Amber's mangled corpse splattered on the ground below me. The demon appeared next to me with a wide grin. She didn't need to push me off the bridge. I was already leaping over the edge. She laughed as I hurtled toward the ground.

I smacked the ground with a wet crunch next to Amber's heavily decomposed corpse. Her lifeless eye sockets locked with mine and our blood mingled on the ground as my life faded away.

A Cold February

by Casey Rotenberger

Connected to my closest friend through a 3AM facetime call, I sat in the dark with the safety light casting a blue hue onto my wall. We both stared at our phones in silence trying to process our emotions and find the right words to say. He broke the silence first.

"I think I'm done looking" I looked down at my feet, giving him a change to elaborate. "I want to spend the rest of my life with you, Casey"

I looked back up at my phone, choking back tears. "You know I love you too much to say yes."



COMPOSITION BOOK

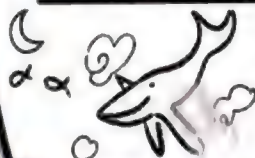


Dream On!



22 - 23

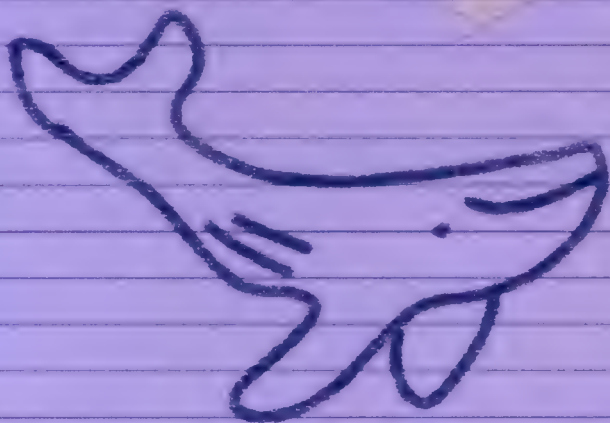
The Gleaner



Looker



Sabrina Workman

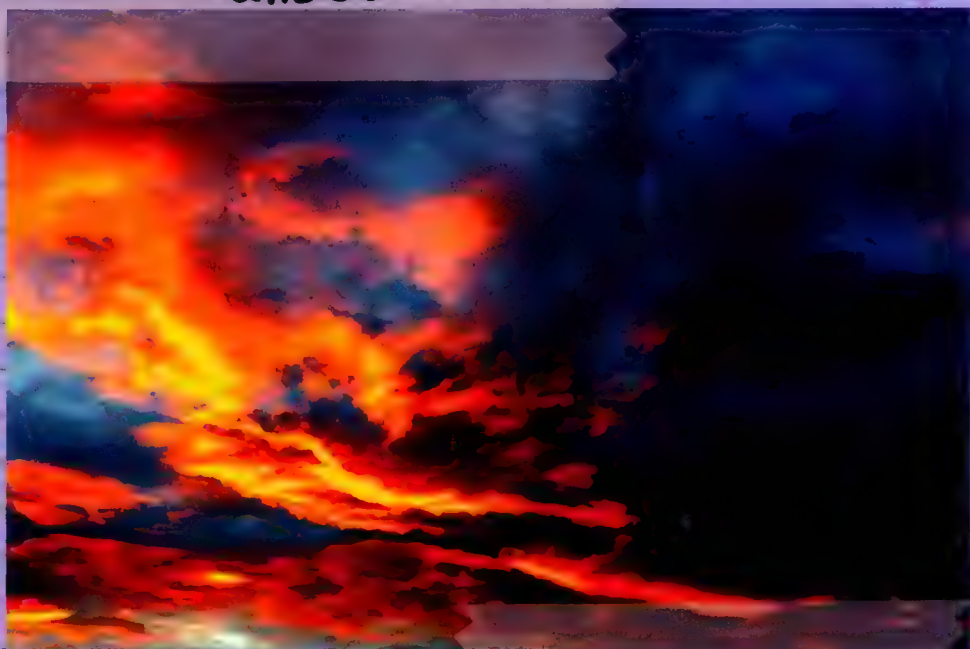


Fever Dream Home



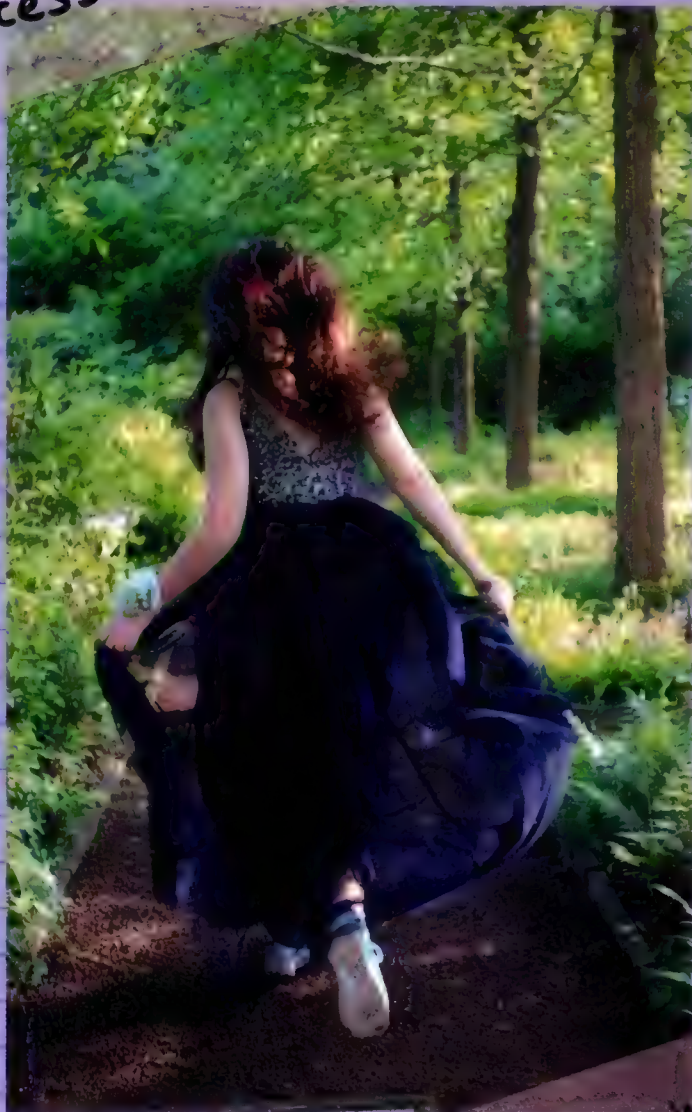
Lizmary Ortiz

Sunset



Maria Viola

Princess on the Run



Sabrina Workman

Fairy Lights



Maria Viola

Get My Good Side

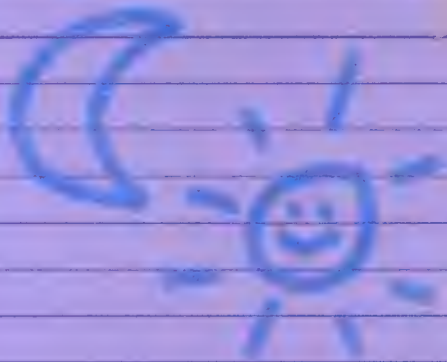


Joshua McConnell

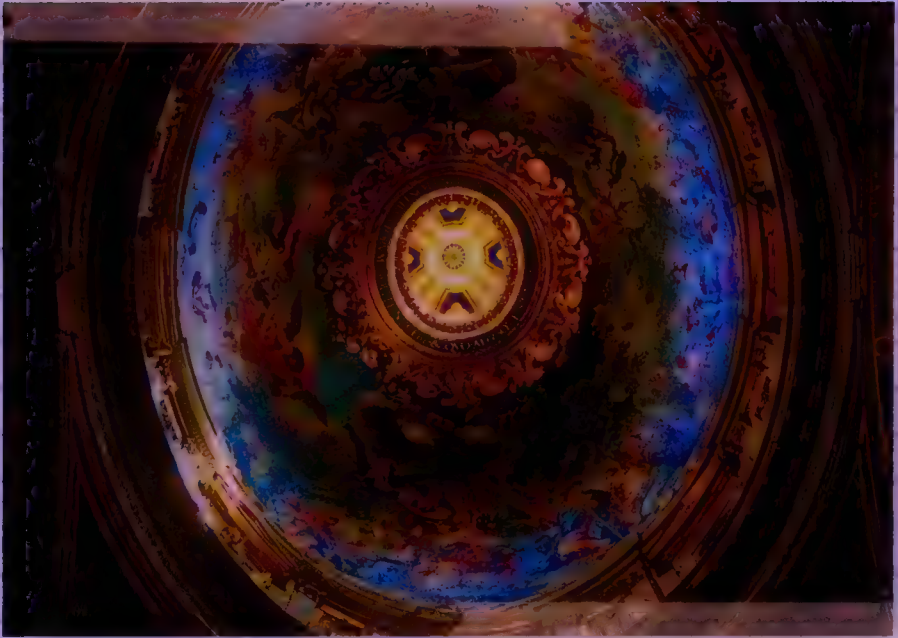
House



Maria Viola



Dream of the Past



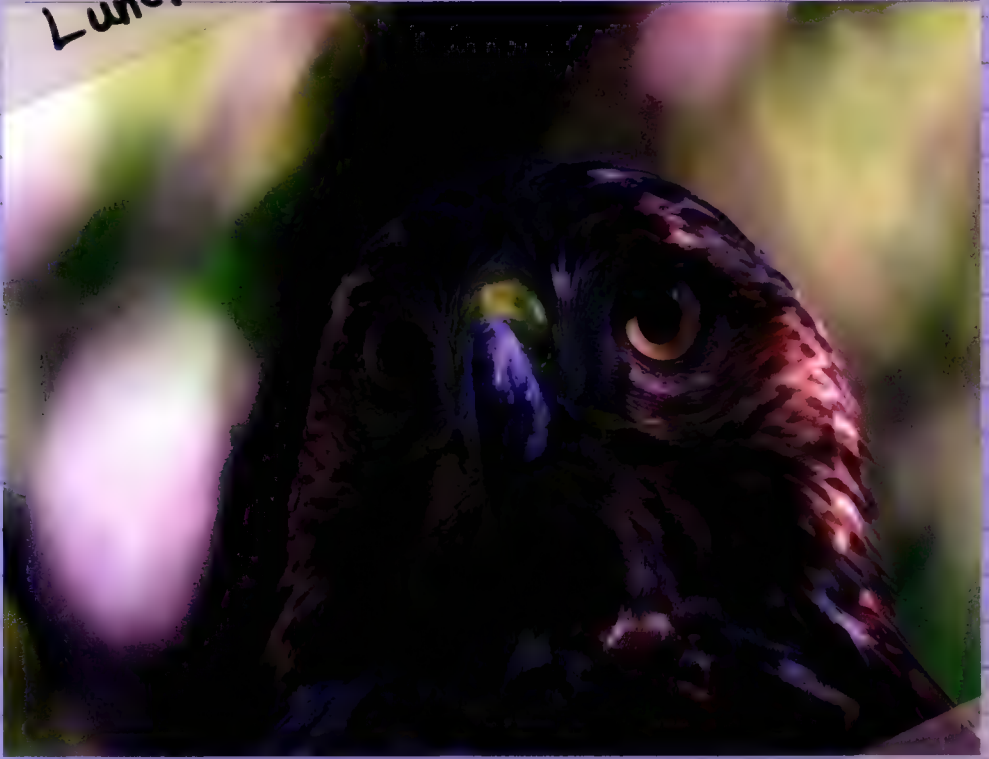
Lizmary Ortiz

Final Bough

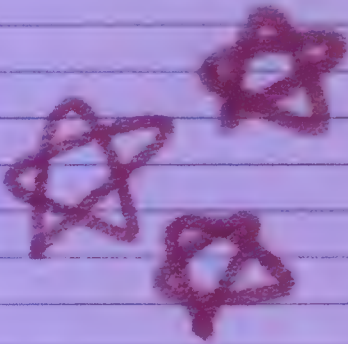


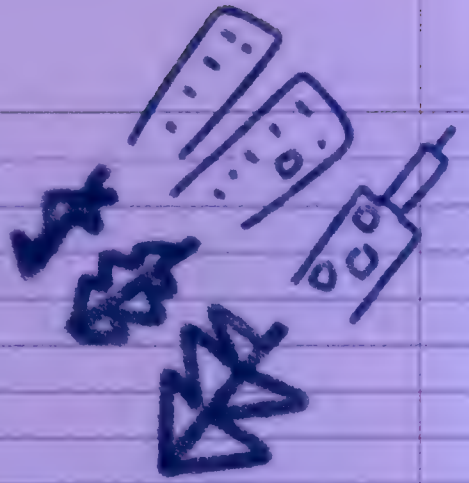
Li Williams

Lunchtime



Joshua McConnell



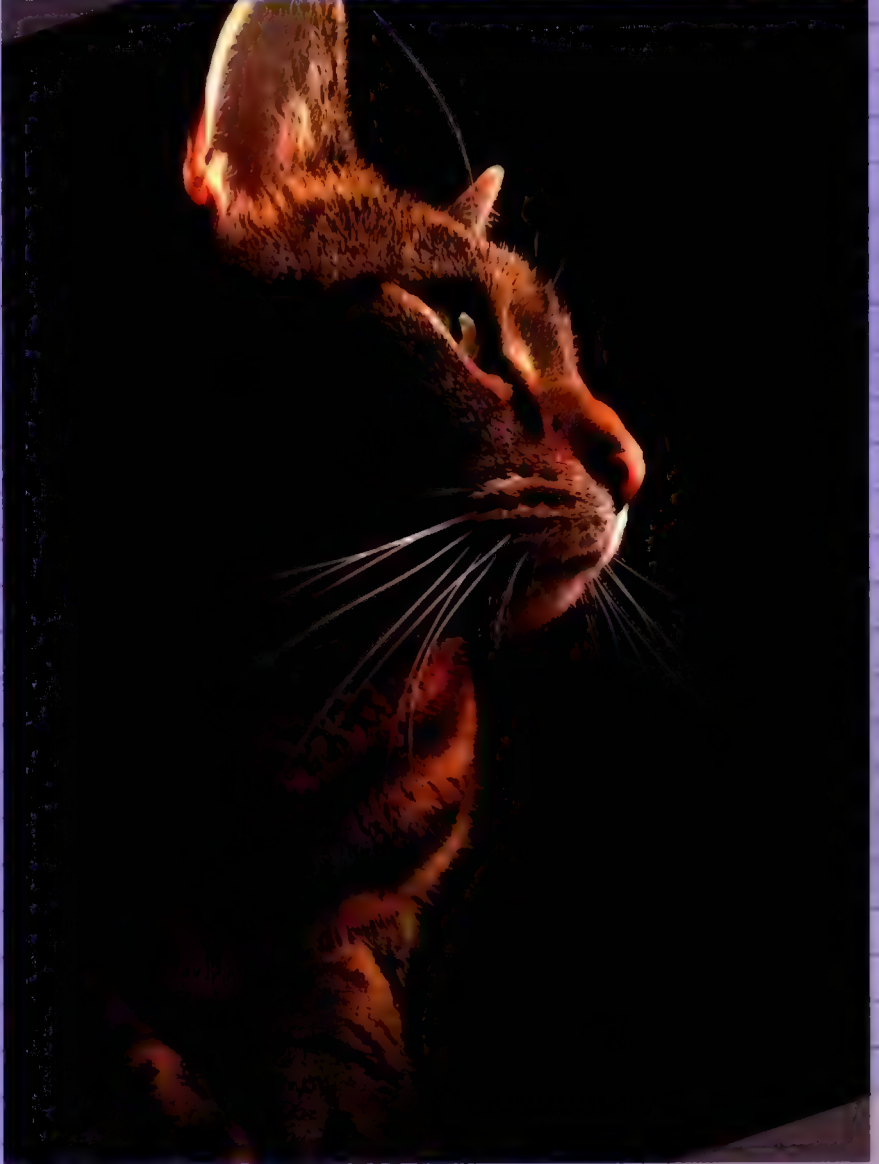


Flock of One



Li Williams

Fiona



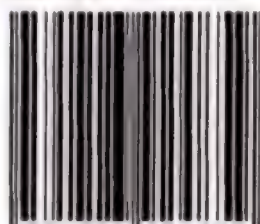
Maria Viola

The Cat's Childhood Home



Lizmary Ortiz

ISBN 9781723924859



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Gloomy Beaches

by Lysette Eloi

Although the water goes deep, i am with you
Through low tides, high tides, big storms and riptides,
I am with you

The sun rises and sets while its shine is reflected on the water
Bask in my light, bask in the day, let my warmth wrap you
Let my hands hold you for i am with you

In the night when it may seem dark, let the stars and moon guide you
When the water is still and my full moon engulfs you bask in my beauty
For i am with you

Night, day, the inbetween when you lay
I will always be with you
For when the waves rush the bay

Swim my loves, swim for it is not time for you to drown.
I am with you
For with every stride, every stroke, i will always be with you

The Burial of the Sardine

by Lizmary Ortiz

I knew for certain that my husband was having an affair. For this, I vowed to make him pay. It must be understood that all a wife seeks from her husband is loyalty. Love and kindness are secondary, negotiable nuances. With loyalty, all else can be overlooked.

What cannot be overlooked is infidelity.

Little did he know, I noticed the way he would get side-tracked on his way home, and arrive later than expected with a glimmer in his eye. Though he had vowed to give up his swigs of *pitorro* and rum late into the night, he seemed to be indulging in other worldly pleasures. I would not allow him to flaunt his wandering eyes before the entire *barrio* of Ponce, so that our *vecinos* could look and say, "Cordero must not love poor Ignacia anymore."

People would say that it was my fault. After all, I gave him no children. I was brought into this world an orphan, and no family of his own did I provide. In more ways than one, I had failed my duty as a wife. Because of this, he was within his right to be *infiel*. Or, so they would say.

Carnaval was underway, a weeklong celebration before Lent arrived. I was not yet sure what I would be giving up. Perhaps it would be my husband. He had gone to all of the festivities that occurred this week, as I stayed behind. On Monday, he told me that I would be bored. On Wednesday, he told me that I would be overwhelmed. On Friday, he left without saying a word.

Today was the last day of the *paradas*, with the festival finally coming to an end at the burial of the sardine. But, before that fish could be buried in the name of good health and peace, dances and marches would take place. The entire island of Puerto Rico would celebrate. Cordero had left this morning right after church, insisting that he would be with his friends in the town square. With night's approach, I knew the festivities would soon begin.

I took care to disguise myself. *Vejigante* masks were sold up and down the streets, and the one I bought had a long, ovular face with an angry scowl. The other masks on the stands were too merry- wide grins combined with happy colors. Three white teeth protruded from my mask's mouth and five sharp and colorful horns, combinations of red and orange, sprouted from its head. They were nearly a foot long, little spears acting as my crown. The holes that went over my eyes were slim, but I could see well enough to watch my step down the cobblestone streets of our *vecindad*.

The party was truly underway. Strangers and acquaintances alike were crowding around the town square, many with their children. One young boy stepped on the trailing fabric of my cloak, jolting me backward. As I turned to tell him it was alright, he yelped and ran back to his parents. A dance was taking place across the square, drawing the biggest group of townsfolk. He must be there, enjoying the show. Without me.

I found my husband quite quickly.

There he was, a wrinkled, greying man with his arm around a young girl. The poor thing couldn't be older than twenty, her naive eyes shining as she watched the costumed dancers do their silly little jigs. Her white peasant dress clung to every curve of her youthful figure. My mask was humid, its paper linings sticking to the skin of my face. Cordero did not respect me, and he was letting everyone know it.

I let my feet bring me closer to them. They stood across from me, the circle of *vejigante* dancers spinning madly as the band played a thunderous *bomba* rhythm. I took care to not let myself be swept into the dance, instead inching around the edge of the crowd. I neared my husband, ignoring the thrilled townsfolk that reached out to touch me. Many stroked my arms and shoulders, one young man reached for my chest and I let him place his hand over my heart for a moment before continuing my approach.

Cordero's girl noticed me as I was three people away from reaching them. She grinned, nudging my husband and pointing at me. "*Mira!*" I read her lips since the music was too loud to hear her. "That dancer, he's coming to us!"

Cordero's head swiveled in my direction. Through the slender eye holes of my mask, I could see the confusion painted on his old features. I cocked my head slightly, taking in the grotesque sight. People probably thought he was her father. A father with his arm draped around his daughter's waist.

I don't know why I did not move. For the rest of the dance, all I could do was stare at them. The girl had already turned her attention back to the show, the novelty of my presence having worn off. The people around me were still caressing me lightly, trying to get me to look at them.

Cordero's eyes bounced between the dancers and me. His hazel eyes, the very ones that once looked upon me with adoration and devotion, seemed so dull now. Like murky lake water, they were clouded with dirt and sludge. A deep-set frown tugged at his cracked lips, creating creases around his mouth.

I backed away into the crowd as the dance died down, still keeping my gaze on him. Cordero pulled the girl in and whispered something in her ear. Now swallowed by the crowd, they were out of my line of sight.

My assumptions had been confirmed, a wife's worst fear come true. What was I to do now? I couldn't reveal how I made the discovery; knowing how men are, he would use it as an excuse to label me a lunatic. The moon was nowhere to be found in the sky. This was the opposite of lunacy, - this was complete and utter clarity. It was truly opening one's eyes after dreaming through a fever. Cordero did not love me. Cordero disgusted me.

I turned and marched through the sea of drunkards and families, eyeing an empty alleyway between the town hall and the mayor's home. The light blue house seemed so dark now, with all of its lights off. The mayor surely must be somewhere in the crowd, partaking in the festival. I could take off the costume here, and return home. I would lie in my bed, and begin to accustom myself to how it feels to sleep alone.

I scarcely made it halfway through the unlit corridor before hearing echoes of footsteps behind me. They were fast approaching, so I turned to face whoever was coming. It could be a curious child, coming to see where the colorful creature was wandering off to. Or, one of the other masked dancers was trying to pull me back into the march to the lake two blocks away. There, they would do a few more dances before coming back for the burial. The sardine sculpture sat behind the mayoral office, unguarded but ready for the swarm that would soon surround it. The dancers would bring it out when the crowds returned.

The figure that approached was masculine, yet huffed with exhaustion as it neared me. Squinting through the eye holes of my mask, I could make out a familiar balding hairline.

Cordero was out of breath when he caught up to me. He held his hand up as if asking me to wait, as he struggled to slow his shallow breaths. The poor old thing could barely sprint a yard without tiring himself.

"Is there any- *ay Dios mio*," Cordero said weakly. "-any reason why you were staring at us?"

I stood very still. Speaking would give me away, so I couldn't exactly respond. Noticing my silence, Cordero grunted.

"Do I know you?"

I did not move.

"Do you know me?"

Slowly, I nodded. Cordero grabbed at the collar of his dress shirt. It was white, dirtied with drops of liquor, and crinkled with wrinkles of use. I ironed that shirt this morning.

"Do you know Ivelisse?"

What an atrocious name. It didn't roll off the tongue the way mine does. I nodded, though it was a lie.

"What have we done to offend you?"

The countless offenses I had suffered manifested in my mind. The times he pushed my hand away or looked at me with utter disinterest. Though Ivelisse had inadvertently participated in the worst offense of all, I could not blame her for it.

I raised a gloved hand and stretched out my finger towards him. Cordero's expression sank.

"Was it my doing?"

I nodded again.

Cordero let out a laugh that echoed more of despair than humor. "Ya veo, I know what you seek to do. You're mocking me- punishing me! Is it a sin for a man like me to be with a beautiful young girl?"

I lowered my finger, pointing now at his left hand. His ring was still sitting on that wrinkled finger, a band of gold that was tarnished with maltreatment. He never bothered to polish it.

"What? This?" Cordero raised his hand and the dulled ring didn't shimmer in the slightest. "¿*Mi esposa*? Yes, I had a wife. She is no longer with us. Does that cleanse me of this sin? Will you no longer accuse me?"

My chest rose angrily. Even to a masked creature, to whom he could confess anything under the guise of anonymity, he denied me.

I could bear the contempt no longer.

I reached up and pulled off the heavy mask, the motion ripping off pieces of it internally and leaving paint and paper stuck to my cheeks. The skin of it, which reeked of the sun-dried cow bladder it came from,

felt like plaster. The humid air of the *isla* seemed cool compared to how warm it was within the mask.

Cordero watched as I revealed myself, his eyes widening. His hand was still hovering there, presenting its ring to me.

“¿*Iganica*?” His voice was shrill.

I was holding the horned mask in my arms, the beating drums of the *bomba* music now echoing in the distance. I felt naked without the *vejigante* covering, the demon mask acting as my protector.

Cordero's eyes narrowed. “*Maldita loca*. You followed me? You wore this ridiculous *disfrace*?”

“I was right,” I replied, my voice calm. Stray hairs stuck to the sticky paper on my face.

“¿*Sucia cabrona*! To be so insecure that you followed me here instead of being at home like you should be!”

“I was right.”

“I can't believe you. I'm leaving, go back to the house. We'll talk about this tomorrow,” Cordero turned his back to me. There it was, one of the worst offenses of all. All these weeks, that's all he's ever done. Turning away from me, as if I'm a sight he can't bear to see.

I was right. Clutching the mask tightly, I threw myself forward and thrust the colorful spikes at Cordero. They were sharp, made by some of the finest artists on the island. They pierced through him easily, wedging themselves in his back.

With a moan, Cordero stumbled to his knees. I yanked out my mask, that secondary face that had shielded me from his scorn, and freed it from his body. Cordero collapsed onto the cobblestone ground, twitching. He stilled.

The drums kept their rhythm in the distance. It wouldn't be that way for

long. Part of me wanted to cry, to shed at least one tear for my husband. Nothing would fall from my eyes. Instead, I took that devilish, grinning facade and let it consume me once more. With the mask secured around me again, I was able to bend down and inspect him.

Cordero's face was smushed against the stone floor, but from the side, I could see the ghostly expression of shock imprinted on it.

I nudged his head with one of my protruding spikes, my hands outstretched behind me as if I was doing a primal dance.

I was assured that Cordero was dead. Now, where to put him? I couldn't exactly leave him in the street, not with so many people returning to the square in mere minutes. There would be no way to ascertain my innocence. My only defense would be that I was home alone. There were no kids for me to tuck into bed, who could innocently maintain that their *mamá* did not leave their side for a second. There were no relatives who lived with us. No friends I could ask to lie for me.

All I had was myself, as most women do in this life.

I got on my knees to pray but remembered that God was a man who resented husband-slayers. Would he have mercy on me? Would any Saint listen to my prayers? I struggled to think of who -or what- could cleanse me of this fault.

The drums seemed to pause. The Sardine.

There it sat, right behind the mayor's office. The parade float holding up the coffin was plain enough, a wooden contraption only long enough for the mock coffin. The coffin was plain, but made of a darker wood than the stand it was on. Floating above it -though really suspended by a metal pole- was a sardine *de papel maché*. Its body was a mismatched mix of light and dark blue, whilst its lips and fins were *acerola* red. The mouth was open as if it were gasping for air.

The Sardine watched as I gave it my offering. I pried open the coffin easily, revealing the dummy of straw that lay there. I saved him from his fate, hauling him against the walls of the town hall along with the

other trash. In his place, I put one who was more deserving. Cordero was heavy, but his loose, aged bones made him easier to drape over the edge of the coffin. I could hear the crowd approaching. With a final heave, I rolled Cordero face-down into the box.

The dancers and townsfolk quickly returned. The town square was full of life yet again. I was happier this time, with my *vejigante* brothers and sisters dancing around me joyously. We locked horns and shook our hips at each other. The stains on my horns must've looked like paint. One took my hands and spun me in a circle. Kids and women and men looked and cheered us on. *Trompetas* were blared. Tambourines were jingled, and *güiros* were rubbed.

Four other costumed people appeared from that familiar alleyway, with the centerpiece of our celebration in tow. *Jibaros* threw their pava hats to the sky, and women spilled their drinks over their son's heads. I jumped up and down in place, shaking my hands and imagining droplets of red flying from my fingertips.

The Sardine was finally sitting in the center of the square. I flung myself backward, accidentally bumping into someone. They merely laughed and pushed me lightly in return.

The funeral procession began. It was a quick affair. A short speech by the mayor, who wore a plain suit, which I didn't pay much attention to. My eyes were locked on the coffin.

A familiar face crossed my line of sight. A young girl with raven hair, as I once had. I saw another equally young woman approach her and offer her *caneca* of liquor. Ivelisse shook her head, relaxing her hand over her stomach.

I laughed.

Shifting my gaze back over to the Sardine, I saw a group of my fellow masked persons beginning to push its float. We followed them, as one of the female singers began her final song of the night. She mourned the past, and the sins we had all committed in the past year.

Her voice rang out like the call of the *coquis* in the night. "¡*Todos son santos cuando hablan de los pecados ajenos!*"

We marched along the streets, past homes where people waved from their balconies. A tanned little girl gave me a wide smile as I danced by her house.

We were finally approaching the lake, the Sardine's final resting place. A hole had already been dug earlier, ready for the offering to be swallowed into the earth. Standing by its edge, I saw just how deep the grave was.

The stand on which the Sardine sat was brought to a halt, having reached its final destination. Ivelisse was nowhere to be seen now. Perhaps the walk had been too strenuous for her.

One of the *vejigantes* grabbing the front end of the coffin motioned for me to come over. I hesitated for a second before obliging, positioning myself at the back end with one of my fellow creatures. Their mask was a bright shade of yellow and had a gleeful smile on its face. Its cloak had golden ruffles on its sleeves to match. They grabbed one corner, and I held the other, until we all combined our strength to lift the coffin off its mount. The casket was heavier than I anticipated.

With a heave, we dropped the coffin into its burial hole. The wood stood solid and rested in the dirt with a low grunt. Thankfully, its lid didn't burst open.

We then reached for the ground and collected little balls of dirt in our hands. One by one, everyone took turns throwing and kicking soil into the plot. As we did so, we all united into the burial song. All of our voices rang out as one, echoing into the night.

"¡Ya se muerto el carnaval!

Ya lo llevan a enterrar,

échenle poquita tierra

que se vuelve a levantar."

On the last line, I crossed my fingers. Whilst the crowd rejoiced and celebrated the end of Carnival, I turned to go home. I removed my disguise, leaving it by a Flamboyant tree. Exhaustion weighed on me.

celebrated the end of Carnaval, I turned to go home. I removed my disguise, leaving it by a *Flamboyant* tree. Exhaustion weighed on me.

As I walked down the streets we had marched down, the absence of the crowd left a peaceful silence. The sense of suffocation that had enveloped me for so long dissipated with the end of the festivities.

I looked forward to laying in my bed and going to sleep. Lent would begin tomorrow, and I had to consider what I would be giving up for God. It would have to be a worthy sacrifice for penance.

Perhaps I will only eat fish for these next forty days.

The College Experience

by Beth Brown

I felt pins and needles on my fingertips.

I was scrolling through Instagram, looking at my classmate's posts.

The captions: "My next four," "Future home," and "Best decision ever."

I closed out the app and opened my email which read:

Congratulations on your acceptance to Lehigh Carbon Community College.

No, I won't be posting that on Instagram. It's embarrassing to go to community college.

I put my phone down.

I was at work.

I felt a warm, happy sensation in my chest.

I stared at the degree that stood on my mantle.

The beige paper stared back at me.

Associate of Arts. From community college.

My mom tells me, "You are finally the smart one."

First Generation student.

I have to go to work tonight.

I felt sweat on my palms.

I had just driven an hour's commute to my new college.

Transfer student.

A classmate told me, "you don't live here? That's kind of a waste."

Waste.

I cried in the bathroom, and my professor walked in, staring at me blankly.

Perfect timing.

What was I doing here anyways?

I don't belong.

I should just get to work early instead.

I felt my eyes burning.

The email, barely visible through the tears, burned back into me.

"Your best option is to change your major or I don't advise you to continue in higher education."

What about my degree? The one on the mantle?

It was from community college anyways.

I cried in the library.

Forget it.

Just go to work.

I felt the cold air on my nose.

I watched the train roll in at my new college.

Second new college.

This time, I lie during an icebreaker. I can fit in this time.

I never said I went to community college.

I say yes, I live here, on campus, I don't live at home.

I say I've been here, all four years. Like a normal student.

The lie settled in me.

Eating me.

I just needed to pack my things up.

I had to get to work.

I felt the short breaths and hot tears on my face.

No, I have never lived here.

No, I am not the student that has been here all four years.

I am the worker that changes into her work uniform in the library bathroom after class.

I am the student that gets frustrated when a class gets canceled after driving an hour.

I am the student that can't comfortably crash into her dorm bed after class; because the clock-in time is at 1.

I am the student, desperate to get involved; but she lives an hour away and has to get to the bank to pay off her car loan before they close.

I am the first generation student that took out thousands of dollars in student loans by herself without help.

I am the human that cried in her car alone because this life was lonely.
Man, I needed to get to work.

I felt the hot, late summer sun on my head.
I was at the same college. Nothing new.
This time, I was honest.
This time, I was enough.
The community college degree on my mother's mantle was enough.
This is what my college experience was, and it was enough for me.
This life was enough.
I had made a friend, too.
Not the cows I walk past.
Not the horses I stop to take pictures of.
A real, human friend.
I had to get to work after class anyways.

Didn't You See That

By Samantha Demoy

My anxiety has reached an all-time high in the front seat of my mother's Toyota. Her eyes glazed over in a liquor induced fog, unaware of the direction she is driving in. This car feels as if it was a death machine. My hands grip the handles as she struggles to keep her eyes open. I am scared for her, and I am scared for me. Silently hoping that the cop we passed earlier might pull her over. The car falls off the side of the road, barely missing a telephone pole. "Mom," I cautiously say. "Didn't you see that?"

Another Love Poem

By Zaida Martin

Sweet Aphrodite

Goddess of Love

Blessed am I in your name

My lavender, my lovely

Has found me in your grace

Sunshine in human form

The light to my cold pale moon

Dear Aphrodite

Praise be to you

The Dream of Reality

by Clarissa Herholdt

As I sit on the curb of a brisk downtown street, I stare up in desperation at the thrashing clouds. Once again burned. Once again in the dark. Dropping my head, I bury my face into my hands but hiss at the pain springing from my fingertips. Bruised from another useless attempt at a dream I couldn't quite grasp.

Sighing out I drop my hands and instead stare at the cars rushing in front of me. Some say it's the economy. Others blame the political party. Some even say its aliens. But the main conclusion is that everyone is hiring.

But no one is hiring me.

A loud crack of thunder breaks my thoughts as a gust of wind blows through me. Suddenly a blue piece of paper blows past landing on the ground. Striking white words almost shine off the page. The company's name is what I catch onto first, 'Dream Corp.' followed closely by, 'Job Offer', 'All walk in's welcome', '\$1000 first month sign on bonus'.

My eyes widen and the piece of paper lifts back up into the air. Almost being pulled by an invisible string. I jump after it, but it evades me just out of reach.

And just like that I take off in a chase after the flyer of possibility.

Running down the pavement on the last shred of energy I have left in the day, I grasp onto this chance of a dream.

The flyer glides closer to me, and I jump to catch it but stumble on my own feet, barreling into the sidewalk. I hiss out as the skin rips up from my hands and knees. Ignoring the immediate pain, I lift my head, searching the sky for the flyer and fearing the possibility of it disappearing.

My eyes scan the horizon of the tall city buildings that surround me as another loud rumble of thunder yells out around me. The paper gone. Evaporated into thin air. I hold my head in my hands as the pain bites into my skin with every beat of my heart.

What was I thinking? I groan out as I examine the palms of my hands. I mean who even chases a piece of paper across town. I blow at the small cuts and pull away some of the debris sitting in them, gagging at the sight and the pain. Unexpectedly, the first drops of rain hit the ground next to me. And quickly the rain comes pouring down harder and harder.

The crowds of people walk past me. Dashing about, trying to get undercover and out of the rain. Some of them pull up umbrellas and continue their day uninterrupted by the shower. I try to get up on my wobbly and injured legs but too many people keep pushing through and I find myself pushed to the edge of the road.

Looking up into the rain, the dark clouds cover the world around me. I sigh out as another dream crumbles into the pit of reality, "I guess I will have to try again tomorrow."

I breathe in deeply trying to keep the thoughts at bay as the tears well up in my throat threatening to break free. Swiping at my face carelessly I try to stop the tears that have fallen but are already covered by the rain. Pulling my knees close I feel for the photograph in my pocket. The last piece of evidence of a life that was forgotten.

Who were they? Did they know I was missing? Do they miss me at all?

Are they even still alive?

Lifting my eyes slightly off the ground I stare into a puddle in front of me that has quickly begun to form. Blue and pink lights flicker in and out of existence in the world of water. The image disrupted by the intenseness of the drops. Someone moves over slightly as they walk stopping the rain for a moment over the puddle. I blink. The word 'DREAM' pops up in blue light, like the flyer I was chasing - my eyes widen.

I don't finish the thought and instead look up at the building above me the rain pouring down so hard I can barely make out the sign let alone the words. A huge glowing neon sign reading the words, 'Dream Corp.' shines proudly through the heavy rain. My mouth hangs agape as my eyes move downwards where large blue entrance sign screams at me. I laugh manically as I try to wipe the pouring rain from my eyes. It was here this whole time! I peer at the posters on the wall talking about open positions for amateur beta testers. If it's for an amateur that means I could do it right?

Standing up tediously I stagger towards the glass door, my legs screaming at me in protest. I push through the door and onto the white marble of the fancy building. The door swishes closed behind me blocking out the sound of the rain as another muted blast of thunder screams outside.

The room is filled with images of a relaxing and calming locations. Some in a tranquil forest, others a beach. The squelching of my shoes is the only sounds echoing throughout the lobby besides the calm typing of the lady sitting behind a white desk in the middle of the room.

I make my way over cautiously to her desk and she raises her eyes over the brim of her glasses at my arrival, her blonde hair shaking as she types vigorously. She looks me up and down at my insane appearance before standing up and smiling at me.

"Hello, and welcome to Dream Corp. Are you by any chance, here for the beta test?" She asks as she shuffles some papers around.

I lick my lips and try to smile as I move my backpack onto the ground, "Uh, yes, I have my resume here if -"

"Oh, don't worry about that, miss, this position is for amateurs and people who have no prior simulation experience. Resumes are not required." She smiles brightly placing a white clipboard and pen on the counter in front of her.

I smile nervously at her. "This is just some general health and information forms, and the last page is a consent form in case anything goes wrong so we can ensure you as our employee is kept safe at all times." I nod excitedly. "You are also quite lucky, we only had one spot available on the new team so welcome aboard."

After all this time, there really was a place that was waiting just for me. I pick up the pen eagerly as my eyes read over unintelligible words. I squint at them as my brain struggles to understand the squiggles on the page. She continues talking but I can't seem to catch anything important.

Is this dream maybe too good to be true? Am I too trusting of this situation?

"Miss?"

"Miss!" her voice brings me back to reality and I look up at her my eyes wide. "If you're ready you can just sign at the bottom, and we can move forward with the process."

I shake my head, "Uh...yeah...sorry." I clear my throat, quickly signing the last page of the document.

She takes the clipboard from me and reads the information, "Thank you, miss...Kida, I look forward to seeing you around more often." She then proceeds to point at door on the backside of the room behind a white room divider that is covered in cut out geometric shapes.

"Now if you go through that door you'll enter a hallway, and you want to go and wait in room two. Okay?" I nod. "In that room will be a change of clothes and a shower. Wash up and get dressed, then just sit on the chair. The testers will explain the test fully to you and the first test will be administered today in about an hour, so I suggest you hurry." She smiles again at me, and I thank her quickly before rushing to the door, backpack in hand.

My feet squelch disgustingly against the floor, leaving trails of black mud as I go, the sound making the hairs on the back of my neck stand up in embarrassment. Maybe a shower and a change of clothes wouldn't be too bad right now.

I touch the handle of the door carefully and open it, revealing another white empty hallway. Several doors line the wall marked with different numbers from one to five, in interchanging colors of blue and pink.

A door marked with a pink number two stands along the left-hand part of the wall, and I shuffle towards it. Opening it carefully, I peer inside. The room is mostly dim with a few yellow lights illuminating the inside. A pink chair sits in the back of the room, hidden behind a table in the front that has folded material on top of it in the same color.

I guess that's the outfit. I think it's going to clash with my new hair. I chuckle at the thought nervously touching the short strands of firetruck red. Another collapsed dream. My presence makes the lights grow brighter in the room illuminating a small door on the right where I can presume the washroom sits.

Quickly obeying the instructions, I shower and dress in the provided outfit which is just a t-shirt and tracksuit pants. Tracing my tender fingers over the cold table I walk carefully over to the chair. Bright white words printed on the material reads 'Dream Chair'. I raise an eyebrow.

"I think they may have taken the marketing a bit too far."

The door swings open and in steps two people. One very tall man in his late twenties and the other a short older woman who looks like she is in her forties. Both are wearing scrubs and surgical masks as well as gloves.

"Hello, my name is Dr. Marten, and this is my colleague Mr. Hendan." She gestures to the man next to her as she smiles behind her mask.

"Hello, my name is Kida Parker." I put my hand out for them to shake but Dr. Marten holds her hand up stopping my movements.

"That's perfectly okay Miss Parker, we don't do handshakes at Dream Corp."

I drop my hand. "Oh of course, I apologize."

She gestures behind me, ignoring my apology, "Please have a seat." I follow her instructions and sit. The soft padding of the chair almost swallowing me completely.

The sounds of papers moving, and the clink of a metal tray brings my attention back up to the two people in front of me. The doctor flicks through some pages on a clipboard.

"Miss Parker, you signed up for the beta test of our new developmental technology is that correct?" she asks quizzically, as another lady suddenly appears behind her and puts down a tray on the table before leaving the room. The tray holds several items that I can't really make out from where I am sitting. The doctor clears her throat bringing my attention back to her.

"Uh..." I look to the doctor's expectant face, "Yes. I did. And thank you for this opportunity."

"But of course, our philosophy has always been about being open to the public." she smiles behind the mask, her crows' eyes pulling with the movement, "Then we will just get you prepped and ready for the test today." I nod and the man moves over to me with a small machine in hand. I move away cautiously as I look from the machine to him.

"This is just the chipping mechanism to create the simulation, Miss Parker, its virtually non-existent and will have no issues in your everyday life. We just need it to run the tests and save the collected data."

"Oh, okay, that's no problem then." I swallow nervously, though still a bit cautious I sit forward as he moves the machine to the back of my neck.

"Now you may feel some slight pain." And before I can reply, a sharp sting shoots up from the back of my neck and I flinch digging my nails into the armrests of the chair.

Slight pain? Yeah right. I scowl at him, raising a tentative hand to the back of my neck where the tender skin makes me jump again. A small lump now sits at the base of my neck. That is going to have to be something to get used to.

He nods at the Doctor who then begins speaking again.

"The simulation will be of a beach scene for our new virtual game. It should only last ten minutes in total, but you will have to stay after exiting the simulation for another couple of hours for post observation and record keeping on your thoughts."

"We will provide a light sedative to help the process mull over easier for you. Once you are feeling drowsy, be sure to say, 'Dream On,' and this will begin the simulation."

"Once you enter the simulation you will see a countdown clock that will begin counting down from ten minutes exactly, when the timer is done you will say 'Dream Off' and that will bring you out of the simulation. If anything goes wrong during the simulation, you will be ejected from it and wake up immediately."

This is a lot to take in.

"Understandable Miss Parker?" she looks pointedly at me, and I feel slightly uncomfortable under her gaze.

I lick my lips suddenly nervous, "Dream on, dream off, got it." I smile but something feels suspicious about this situation. Relax Kida, it's just nerves because it's a new job and you had zero prep time. Just Breathe. Think of the opportunity.

"Alright then, we can begin." She nods to the man who has somehow already set up a drip next to me and is holding a syringe. I swallow and he takes my arm carefully. Looking away I count back from ten trying to distract myself from the prick on my aching body.

"Alright Miss Parker, remember, Dream On to enter, Dream Off to exit." I nod, the heaviness of my eyelids becoming more difficult to fight. She looks down at a stopwatch.

"3, 2, 1, you may begin, Miss Parker." The beep of a button rings out in the hollow room.

I close my eyes and breathe out. Dream On.

I wait. The feeling of being so tired disappears. But I sit still. Nothing changes.

Did I do something wrong?

I open my eyes carefully but am greeted by something I could never have imagined.

Sunshine. Brighter than anything I had ever seen before, cascades through the tops of palm trees. The sound of waves crashing on a shore echo around me as I spin around feeling the sand beneath my feet. I look around completely dumbfounded.

"What on earth is going on?" I say amazed, as the smell of the ocean overwhelms me. And before I know I am sprinting down the shoreline, laughing manically. The water gushes over my feet wetting my legs and pants.

"This is amazing!" I touch my head in disbelief, which makes me jump because suddenly I have my normal hair on my head. My hands rush through the strands happy in their usual length and weight.

"It's real." I whisper out bewildered smoothing the hair over my face, "Surely it's all real?" I echo out, examining my body for all the cuts

and bruises I have. But my body instead remains in perfect health. My hand brushes over the back of my neck where the chip is supposed to sit but nothing is there.

"The countdown timer begins." A loud booming voice erupts around me, and I jump in fright, looking up into the sky where large red numbers countdown a ten-minute clock.

I collapse on the ground amazed, "It's not nearly enough time." I sigh out as I try to take in everything around me, suddenly too overwhelmed to even move. The water rushes up to me and laps at my legs and I close my eyes breathing in the scents around me. "If only I didn't have to wake up." I sigh out.

Lying down on the sand, I sigh stretching in the warmth of the sun. My body and mind finally feeling at rest. Like a weight has finally been taken off my shoulders.

"Five seconds remaining." The voice booms loudly and I shoot up alarmed. Did I fall asleep? I look around me upset.

"I didn't even have enough time to enjoy anything." I whimper out.

I watch as the timer countdown ends my time here and I reluctantly close my eyes again.

Dream Off.

I wait. The same feeling comes over me again as I wait in the dark. Okay let's try opening my eyes.

Nothing.

"What do you mean the subject didn't wake up?!" the Doctor from earlier shouts, "All the others did!"

"I am sorry ma'am, but she is just unresponsive, the chip is showing no brain activity."

What? I'm here, I can hear you! Please! Help me! I'm responsive. I'm here!

She sighs out, "Fine, expel the program. The investors are not going to be happy about this."

"But what about the body ma'am?"

"I don't care, that's why we had the consent form in the first place. Your job right now is to just make this mess disappear."

Disappear. Consent forms. Please, just get me out of here! I scream but all that greets me is the dull silence and empty darkness.

Please I don't want to die! Please!

"Please!" I open my eyes and shoot up from lying down on a bed. My breathing coming out in ragged breaths. My eyes are greeted by sunshine streaming into a beautifully decorated ornate room with pillars and ivy holding up the ceilings and walls.

A crash turns my attention away from the room. A woman in a toga cowers on the floor, a broken pot leaving behind a puddle of water sparkling in the shining sun.

"Please forgive me, Your Grace!"

"What?" I say confused. "Did I not wake up?" my hands go up to my head where even longer hair sits than before, red ends contrasting the blonde locks. I look down at my body, this time dressed in different clothes like the other woman is wearing.

"They didn't say anything about another simulation?" The panic rises in my throat, making it difficult to breathe as I clench the hair in my hands. Dream Off, "Dream Off!" I yell, "Dream Off, Dream Off, Dream off!" I scream into the air, but it doesn't change anything, the woman looks at me afraid and instead more people come into the room.

A potbellied man and two people who look like Roman soldiers from a poorly made production rush in confused. The potbellied man's eyes widen, and he drops to the floor face first, the other two people look confused and kneel behind him, "Our Grace has awoken, blessed be the gods. Send out the signals!" He gestures to the woman who dashes out without another moment of hesitation.

"Your Grace?" I try to pull myself away from them, but my body doesn't listen and instead feels lame and heavy, "Who are you people? Where am I?" I try to sound sure of myself, but my voice betrays me by quivering and shaking.

Maybe this isn't a dream? I think to myself and back to what I heard in the dark. Maybe I really am dead?

"Your Grace," the man's voice brings me back to the situation, "We have been waiting for over five hundred years for you to wake up." Five hundred –

I shake my head, "What do you mean?"

He looks at me confused, "Your Grace, you are of the old world, sent by the gods to teach us how to become better enlightened, they prophesized of your awakening since the Great War ravaged the lands."

"What?" is the only word I can say as the question keeps rolling out through my very core.

"Your Grace, you have been sleeping for over five hundred years. The Long Dream has ended. And now we can finally flourish again." He says sincerely, concern covering his face because I am not understanding his words.

I look him in the eyes carefully. His skin is sweaty and his breathing uneven. The previous simulation was agreed upon, the only thing that was different was my hair, my body, and the sky.

I swallow as my eyes glance down at my hands. They move painfully slow up to the back of my neck. I almost stop breathing as they touch the lump of where the chip is.

My eyes widen, the sky. I need to see the sky. Dashing off the bed I collapse onto the floor, my legs painfully numb.

"Your Grace!" he yells in concern at me, but I ignore him and scramble over to the windows ledge. The timer. The only thing that could say this has any truth is the timer. Crawling across the floor I pull myself up using the walls and columns.

With every ounce of energy, I have left I pull. This has to be a dream. This has to be a dream. The words keep tumbling through me.

Pulling myself up all the way I lean on the banister of the window. My eyes search the sky. The dread sets in as my mind yells at the impossibility of it all. But the only thing that meets me is an empty blue sky.

The air is knocked from my lungs as I collapse to the floor.

"This has to be a dream," I laugh manically pulling my legs to my chest as I rock myself, "There is no way I could survive five hundred years." The man scrambles in front of me as two women come rushing in trying to help me back up onto the bed.

The only thought that crosses my mind as they help me back up onto the bed is – I guess this time I dreamed too hard. So much so that it became reality.

Colophon

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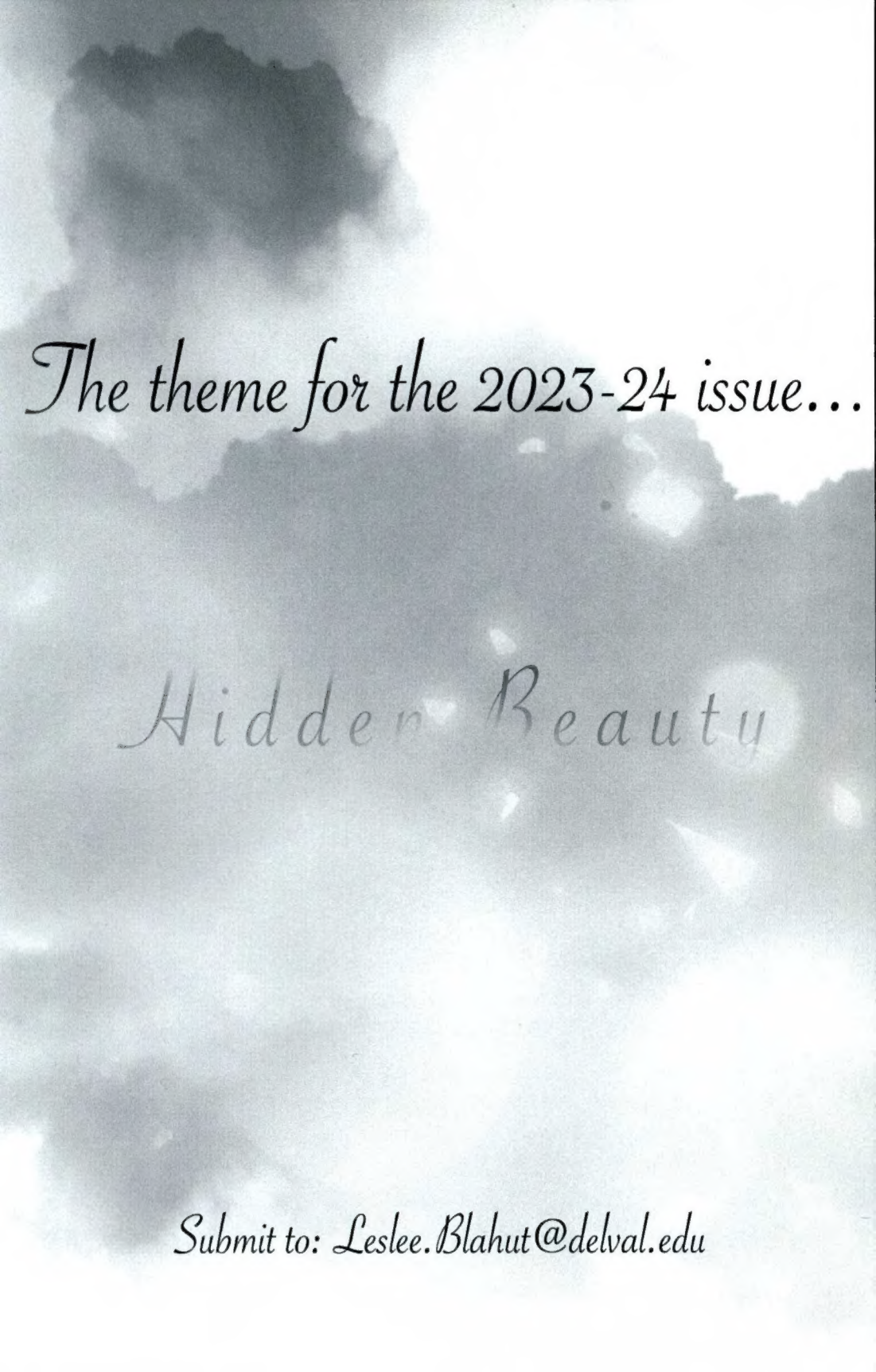
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Submit to: Leslee.Blahut@delval.edu

